DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 411 RC 015 888

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TITLE A Content Analysis of Textbooks in a Southern Appalachian School District.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Content Analysis; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Bias; *Ethnic Groups; Literature; Reading Materials; Relevance (Education); Rural Areas; *Rural Education; Social Studies; Student School Relationship; Textbook Bias; *Textbook Content; *Textbook Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Appalachia (South); North Carolina

ABSTRACT

Textbooks used in grades 2 through 12 in a county school system in rural North Carolina were analyzed to determine the degree of cultural congruency between school curriculum and ethnic cultural setting in Appalachia. Thirty-five elementary school reading books, high school and elementary school social studies books, and high school literature books were examined for explicit or conceivable rural Appalachian content and setting, frequency of Appalachian related items indexed, and authorship by Appalachian writers. Attention was paid to distortion, factually incorrect or incomplete statements, ethnocentric viewpoints, and the absence or imbalance of material relating to ethnic minorities. Elementary reading books contained no stories set in Appalachia and stories generally took place in urban settings. Social studies texts showed similar urban orientation and evaluative distortion of rural areas. Material about Appalachia stressed the area's deficiencies and the backwardness of its inhabitants. High school literature texts contained one short story by an Appalachian writer and no selections set in Appalachia. The content of the examined textbooks confirmed complaints of Appalachian students and parents that schools were run by and for outsiders. Selection of more balanced texts and use of supplemental reading materials were suggested to help students see school as relevant and worth continuing. A 43-item reference list concludes the document. (LFL)

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# A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TEXTBOOKS IN A SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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American Educational Research Association
San Francisco, California
April 16-20, 1986

Session: G 41

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A Content Analysis of Textbooks in a Southern Appalachian School District

## OBJECTIVES

This paper is based on research which examined 35 textbooks used in grades 2-12 in a county school system in rural southern Appalachia. The purpose of the research was to determine the degree to which the material in the textbooks, both written and illustrative, was culturally congruent with the experience of rural Appalachian students. This particular research was part of a broader study funded by the National Science Foundation which investigated the relationship of Appalachian ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and rural/urban residence to educational decisions and attitudes. As part of this broader study, the textbook analysis concentrated on one dimension of the educational setting which might have an effect on the educational experience of rural Appalachian students.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

By most standards of educational success, such as dropout rate, percentage of students going to college, and achievement scores, education in Appalachia does not measure up to education in the rest of the nation (Appalachian Consortium 1981; Caudill 1962; Graff 1962; Parker 1970; Schrag 1972). For example, Caudill (1962) notes that high school graduates in Harlan County, Kentucky, are almost three and one-half years behind the achievement of their counterparts in non-Appalachian

western Kentucky. Graff (1962) reports that 38% of rural eighth graders and 20% of rural twelfth graders in Appalachia have been held back one or more years. In some Appalachian school districts, the dropout rate is as high as 85% (Schrag 1972). More recently, the Appalachian Regional Commission (1986) has reported that the average dropout rate in Appalachia is 10% higher than the national average and that approximately 50% of the counties in the Appalachian region have dropout rates that exceed 40%. Of the ten states in the nation with the lowest percentage of 16 and 17 year-olds in school, eight are Appalachian states (Parker 1970). Yet, research into the possible causes of these "failures" has been relatively scarce. Many non-research based commentaries on education in Appalachia have suggested explanations which are highly similar to those found for low educational success among more visible ethnic groups in the United States -- poverty, culture conflict, cultural incongruency, and prejudice (Branscome 1972; Browning 1978; Clark 1974; Ikenberry 1970; Ogletree 1978; Miller 1977). However, there is little research available to either substantiate or refute these observations. A few community studies carried out in Appalachia have included general observations about education and schools (Beaver 1976; Foster 1977; Hicks 1976; Weller 1965; Stephenson 1968). Other research has focused on the relationship of self concept to low educational achievement (Lord 1971; Reck 1978, 1980; Reck and Reck 1980). This minimal amount of research has, nevertheless, suggested that Appalachian students face many of the same types of problems in school that more familiar ethnic groups face.

Part of the reason for this relative paucity of research in Appalachia is due to the conflict, even among Appalachian scholars, over the question of Appalachian culture and ethnicity. Some scholars have argued that Appalachia does not constitute a separate culture area and that people from the region do not possess a distinct ethnic identity (Stephenson and Greer 1981). These researchers suggest that educational problems in the region are linked more to rural/urban differences than anything else. Others have argued that the Appalachian region does possess a distinctive culture and that people in the region do possess a distinct ethnic identity (Best 1970; Branscome 1971; Clark 1974; DeYoung and Porter 1979; Jones 1971; Miller 1977; Whisnant 1973). These scholars argue that cultural differences, ranging from speech to values, and the conflict which arises over such differences in the schools are the major factors producing educational "failures." Others have argued that socioeconomic class factors are the significant ones for understanding educational problems in the region (Walls 1976, 1978; Walls and Billings 1977). These disagreements, combined with the fact that Appalachians are descended largely from Scotch-Irish protestants who are not viewed as constituting a distinct ethnic group, has prevented many educational researchers from investigating cultural factors as possible explanations for educational "failure."

One such cultural factor which has been the subject of research on education and other ethnic groups is "cultural incongruency" between the school setting and the ethnic cultural setting (Kimball 1974). One component of this

cultural incongruence is textbook material. Research with other ethnic groups has found that one factor which alienates ethnic minority students is the absence of culturally relevant content in school textbooks, as well as content and evaluative distortions concerning ethnic minorities. Previous research has demonstrated biased curriculum material on Native Americans (Costo and Henry 1970; Moore and Hirschfelder 1977; Reynolds and Reynolds 1974), American blacks (McLaurin 1971; Turetsky 1974), Hispanics (Council on Interracial Books for Children 1977), and women (Women on Words and Images 1975). This bias may be explicit in terms of content and evaluative distortions (Reynolds and Reynolds 1974) or it may be more subtle in terms of exclusion, imbalance, and the absence of comprehensiveness in the presentation of ethnic minorities (Kane 1970). This research has led to the development of guidelines for the selection of textbooks that convey relatively accurate and complete pictures of these minorities (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1979).

Despite this research on textbook material dealing with a variety of ethnic minorities in the United States, no research had examined such material used in the Appalachian region. Since the broader research conducted by the authors of this paper had indicated that there were cultural, symbolic, and structural dimensions to rural Appalachian ethnicity (Keefe, Reck and Reck 1983), an investigation of textbook material was undertaken in order to investigate the degree to which the content was congruent with the cultural background of students.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCE

Research was conducted in the Appalachian region of North Carolina in a county school system comprised of a single high school and eight K-8 elementary schools. Approximately 5000 students are served by the system. The county is predominately rural with 38 percent of the population living in the county seat, which has a population of only 12,000. Approximately two-thirds of the residents of the county are descended from families who have resided in the Appalachian mountains for three generations or more. Over the past thirty years, significant migration into the area has occurred due to the growth of the skiing and tourist industries.

Data came from 35 textbooks which are used in grades 2-12 in the schools. The textbooks fall into three general categories: (1) elementary school reading books; (2) high school and elementary school social studies books; and (3) high school literature books. Books in these categories were selected because the content was more likely to be cultural in nature than other textbooks (i.e. in math and science).

A slightly different method of examination was utilized for each category of textbook. With elementary reading texts, each book was read from cover to cover, examining both printed and illustrative content for both explicitly and conceivably rural Appalachian content. Such content was recorded and compared to the total content of each book. For the social studies books, a form was utilized to record information about the text's index and its written and illustrative content. The index was examined to record how frequently Appalachian-related items

were indexed in relationship to the total items indexed. Each indexed item was recorded and the pages covered by that indexed item were read for content. The number of indexed items for Appalachian-related material was compared with the total number of indexed items, particularly those dealing with the other two major regions of the state (the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain). With the high school literature books, stories and essays were examined for explicit or conceivable Appalachian settings and for authorship by writers from Appalachia.

Throughout, attention was paid to explicit distortions, either of a content or an evaluative nature. Content distortions consist of factually incorrect or incomplete statements or images. Evaluative distortions consist of material presented from an ethnocentric viewpoint. In addition, attention was paid to the more subtle factors of exclusion and imbalance since the absence or imbalance of material relating to an ethnic minority may have just as negative an effect as the presence of distorted material (Vogel 1968).

## RESULTS

In the first general category of books -- elementary school reading books -- none of the selections were explicitly set in Appalachia. Thus, there were no content or evaluative distortions concerning Appalachia in the stories. However, on the criteria of exclusion and imbalance, the books rated high since there were absolutely no stories about Appalachia. There

was a significant imbalance in urban and rural settings as well. The setting of a story could be established either by the narrative alone or by illustrations which accompanied the story. Some of the stories could have taken place in either rural or urban settings. Of those stories for which either an urban or rural setting could be established, over 80% of them took place in urban settings. Moreover, stories that were explicitly set in rural areas often had animals as main characters, whereas stories set in urban areas usually had human protagonists. Several of the fourteen books in this category had special sections on urban life with titles such as "World of the City" and "City Places", with no comparable sections on rural life. The more advanced reading books (grades 6-8) contained many more stories that were not classifiable as rural or urban. However, in those that had identifiable settings, urban settings outnumbered rural settings by two to one.

In summary, there was a total absence of explicitly Appalachian content and the content was dominated by urban settings and experiences. Thus, the exclusion of explicit Appalachian material and the imbalance of story settings in favor of urban life are possible sources of cultural incongruence for most children in the school district.

The grades 2-8 social studies texts reveal similar patterns. A total of eight social studies books were examined. Four of these comprised a grades 2-5 series called <u>World and Its People</u>. The other two dealt with the state of North Carolina; one emphasizing history and the other geography.

The first three books in the World and Its People series have no indexed Appalachian content. They deal with the standard topics of "Families and Neighbors," "Neighbors and Communities," and "Communities and Resources." Thus, there are no direct content or evaluative distortions concerning Appalachia. Although much of the discussion of families, neighbors, and communities occurs outside of the context of specific locales, a significant portion of both the discussion and the illustrations reveal an urban emphasis. For example, the majority of homes illustrated are urban - row houses, contemporary architecture, homes with small yards, and so forth. In illustrations of neighborhoods, all of the areas depicted are urban. One would wonder whether the concept of neighborhood applied to rural areas and if it didn't what the relevance of such a heavy dosage of an inapplicable concept has for rural children. The only homes depicted which might be viewed as "rural" are accompanied with captions that reveal an explicit evaluative distortion. The caption below a fairly substantial log house and a two-story farm house with a large front porch reads "Long ago Americans built shelters like this." The descriptors "long ago" and "shelters" convey a strong negative message to rural children who may very well live in such "shelters" (how is a "shelter" different from a "home"?). Only the last of the elementary books has explicitly Appalachian content, but it is very limited, appearing on only 8 of a total of 502 pages. Moreover, the content that is there stresses the deficiencies of the area -- poor farmland, poor

people, and poor roads. For example, the section on the settling of Appalachia emphasizes that not many people settled in the region because the farmland was poor and remote, rather than discussing the positive reasons why people did choose to settle in the mountains. The TVA is credited with providing the necessary development which attracted more industry, which in turn brought the construction of better roads, which brought tourists, which, finally, has led to less isolation and poverty. The final sentence in this section delivers the crowning blow: "Today, Appalachia is becoming more and more like the rest of the country." The message is clear: the ancestors of children reading this book had no good reasons for coming to the region; they owe everything good to the help of outside forces such as the TVA and tourism; and they are, finally, becoming as good as the rest of the nation. Such a section not only presents evaluative distortions, but is also a content distortion. Recent scholars of the Appalachian region have generally interpreted outside economic forces as some of the primary reasons for poverty and underdevelopment in the region, rather than the savior of Appalachia as presented in this text (Lewis 1978; Whisnant 1980).

Two of the remaining four elementary social studies text examined were world geography books which have no Appalachian content since they deal primarily with different countries around the world.

The last two books examined were a state history text and a state goegraphy text. The history text contains 30 indexed items out of a total of 773 which refer in any way to the Appalachian region of the state. Indexed items dealing with

the other two regions of the state -- the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain -- are two to three times more frequent. There are several small content distortions, such as the discussion of the furniture industry in North Carolina which mentions the contributions of only the Piedmont when in fact most of the logging and a considerable amount of the business development actually took place in the mountains. The geography text contains 392 indexed items with approximately 8% relating to the Appalachian region. The term "Appalachia" itself is indexed for only four pages; the term "Piedmont" for 24 pages; and the "Coastal Plain" for 30 pages. Approximately 15% of the text content deals with the mountains. A significant portion of that content concerns the tourist industry, an emphasis which is of primary concern to people who live outside the area.

A total of four high school social studies texts were examined -- two civics books, one sociology book, and one economics book. Since the books dealt primarily with conceptual information related to social groups, economic forms, and the U.S. government, no mention of Appalachia was made.

The nine high school literature texts examined contained the usual classic and contemporary essays and short stories. Only one of the texts had a selection written by an Appalachian author -- a short story by Thomas Wolfe. None of the selections were set in Appalachia, although several could have conceivably taken place in the region as easily as in another locale.

In conclusion, the primary potential problem with the texts is that they either exclude or present an imbalanced view of the Appalachian region of the state, specifically, and of rural life in general. Content and evaluative distortions are relatively few; however, those that do occur are rather significant. The relative absence of such distortions may be due more to the general exclusion of the region from the texts.

SIGNIFICANCE

Given the findings of the broader study which concluded that rural students whose families had at least a three-generational depth in Appalachia had a significantly more negative school experience than did their non-Appalachian counterparts in the county school system, this finding is significant. Rural Appalachian parents and students frequently complain that the schools are run by and for "outsiders." The content of the textbooks confirms this judgement. If the educational experience is to be improved for rural Appalachians, school textbook material should be made more "culturally congruent" with the experience and culture of Appalachian students. This can be accomplished through the use of supplemental reading materials or through a more sensitive selection of primary texts used in the classroom. Since teaching, particularly at the elementary level, is so frequently dependent on the textbook, the selection of more balanced texts may be the most appropriate solution.

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